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JULIA LESAGE ON LAS NICAS, A VIDEOTAPE ABOUT WOMEN IN NICARAGUA

Making contact with Nicaraguans working in grass-roots media allowed me to combine a long-term interest in Latin America with feminist and left political work and with work in film theory. I taught English as a foreign language in Lima, Peru, from 1967 to 1970. Not only did I become bilingual at that time, I also learned filmmaking there. From the 70s to the present, editing JUMP CUT has kept me involved in radical media. In 1981 one of JUMP CUT's writers, Bolivian critic-in-exile Alfonso Gumucio invited me to Nicaragua to teach super8 filmmaking to young artists from the Sandinista Industrial Labor Union and the Agricultural Workers Union. That's when I gathered the materials for LAS NICAS. The group since then has turned to video production and, as the People's Video Workshop (Taller de Video Popular), produces tapes for Nicaraguan and European television and documentaries on work process for the two unions. In 1984 I and Chuck Kleinhans worked with the Taller for two weeks, and currently I am editing a series of short vignettes of a farming community which the women of the Taller and I shot together.

Also, since I have been unemployed for long periods of time, I have become interested in inexpensive media production, and the work you are seeing reflects that financial necessity. I work, for example, with two Canon VHS decks and a little editor that goes between them so I can do a rough VHS edit at home. After that, I rent an inexpensive editing suite at a media arts center in Chicago, the Center for New Television. But the level of technical sophistication of the equipment available to me is much lower than the facilities you have in this visual arts department at Syracuse University.

Let me tell you a little about the technical aspects of my half-inch video work. In terms of editing strategies, I have tried VHS editing and then making a time-base corrected (third generation) 3/4" master, which is what LAS NICAS is -- or I have bumped the VHS original up to 3/4" and then edited that on a 3/4" system, which HOME LIFE reflects.

I distribute both LAS NICAS and HOME LIFE on one VHS tape, which I sell for \$39.95 to individuals and \$59.95 to institutions. By using a bulk duplication service, Western Film and Video near Los Angeles, I got VHS and Betamax copies for about \$13 apiece. That included tape, a plastic box, and about two hours of program. I am enthusiastic about this form of distribution. Progressive film and videomakers who want to get their work out could apply for a \$1,500 grant to duplicate 100 half-inch video copies to send out free to others who would use it. That plan was initiated by the makers of the anti-nuclear film, DARK CIRCLE, and it is one which I will use when I have Spanish-language tapes ready to distribute,

Beyond having embraced consumer video for economic reasons, I have political reasons for promoting it. Half-inch and 8mm video recording can democratize artistic production in the United States. In other words, consumer formats can facilitate community video, grade and high school video, college video "term-paper" projects, and third world video making. It fulfills the old cable ideal of narrowcasting, which fell by the wayside with the advent of superstations and Christian television, which "narrowcasts" but off a very high budget. Special interest groups, minority groups, and those who have little money can express their concerns and convey information or entertain in their own style. As artists, we should take these consumer formats seriously and begin to enjoy working in them, because socially there is a need for us to teach others how to make video in other ways than what they see on television. Most people's formal presuppositions about film or video making come from the dominant media. If you were to hand a camera to a high school student and say, "Make a video," the student would use as a model what s/he has seen on tv and in the movies. People have to learn to re-see what they have in their environment and conceive of ways of

taping it that will interest others. That's why half-inch video attracts me aesthetically and politically.

I constructed the visual track of LAS NICAS with slides partly to improve the quality of the travelogue slide show, which has now become the solidarity slide show. As one who writes and lectures on radical media, I would like to teach people a number of steps which they could take to improve anti-imperialist media. But for me to create this kind of aesthetic awareness means that I have to reach solidarity groups across the United States, and the tape LAS NICAS reaches more people than the original slide show version of it ever could.

If you are going to convey to others what you learn in another country, first, you should learn the art of preplanning. It is essential to think about what questions to ask on your trip and how to shoot for the images you might need. For example, if you're going to Nicaragua or Guatemala or Mexico, you might suspect that you'll need a section in your slide show on religion. When abroad, you should take slides having to do with religious themes. Then when you want to talk for ten minutes on religion, you'll have appropriate images for that topic. It takes imagination to find various kinds of religious images as they exist in ordinary people's lives -- a cross that somebody wears, a Jesus statue in somebody's home, pictures from a book, monuments built by people on Nicaragua's street corners and highways to fighters killed at that spot.

Then, when back home, anyone making a slide show trying to explain life in another country to U.S. viewers should develop a script and make a cassette tape recording to go along with the slide show. This allows you to use different voices and also a certain kind of fictionalization. For example, you can convey information about the debt and U.S. influence in Mexico by writing a dialogue between Mexicans, which is more engaging than the monotone narration of facts and statistics delivered by just one voice. Also a cassette recording can use music, which obviously enhances a presentation, and ambient sounds from "environments" records, especially nature sounds.

Of course, the most important aspect of communicating the lives of people in other cultures to folks in the U.S. is the artist's own ethnic sensitivity. Cultural attitudes have to be "translated" and made understandable here.

I have always been interested in ethnographic filmmaking and in sociology in general. My model in interviewing women for LAS NICAS was a book by Carol Stack called ALL OUR KIN. Stack is a white sociologist who lived with a black family in, I think, a neighborhood of Detroit, and then wrote the major sociological study about the supportive kinship networks among black women and black families. Stack's work offers a powerful argument against the thesis that the black family is breaking down or that what is wrong with black youth is that they don't have a father figure or that their mother left them alone. Clearly the black family survived in slavery, and one way it survived then continues as a survival tactic now -- this is the same survival tactic found among the poor in most parts of the world. A strong kinship network and a strong support network among women assure that scarce resources are shared in times of need, and that babies are welcome as new life in the community and taken care of.

Especially interesting to me was how Stack as a white woman and a white feminist, a white radical as it were, did participant observation anthropology. She related to people on their level and on their terms. At one point she observes that she had gotten an old used car, but this acquisition hurt her relation to the women in the community. She was no longer just a poor single mother like the rest of them, but a little better off. With the kinship-like obligations she had acquired in the community, she had to spend her day shuttling one person's child to the clinic or picking up a couch which somebody else had bought. So she lost her invaluable

sitting-around-in-the-kitchen ability. When the car broke down, she did not get it repaired. She just said she didn't have a car any more and couldn't afford to get it fixed. Then she could sit around and talk to the women as they all shared child care once again.

I used this approach in Nicaragua for a serious political reason. As a feminist I understand the importance of domestic labor and life in the domestic sphere. As an artist (and my mother's daughter) I love the images and sounds I find there. My test for the Nicaraguan revolution was to see how it was flourishing in the domestic sphere and what kinds of changes were occurring there. And what I found was amazing. It is from that place, and from the conversations that take place around the cook shack fire, that Nicaraguan women have become one of the strongest, most self-conscious forces building the revolution. Furthermore, if you visit that country you will feel surrounded by children. Partly to recover from war trauma, partly because there is hope among the poor, and partly because there is free health care and education, there is a huge baby boom in Nicaragua. The median age is 15. When I think of the country facing a U.S. military invasion, I know the Nicaraguans are defending a nation that is literally a cradle.

When I originally went there, I gave the labor union's super8 group all my film because they had so little. In a material sense, that is why I ended up using slides; otherwise I would have shot super8. While I was there I was fortunate to attend a seminar on working women in Latin America which the labor union --the Central Sandinista de Trabajadores or CST -- was conducting outside Managua for five days. There I met women from all over Nicaragua as well as from other places in South America. However, the conference organizers, who had one cassette recorder, had forgotten their microphone and audio tapes. The CST wanted to tape all the proceedings, type them up on stencils, and hand them out to everybody at the end of the conference. In a spirit of collective responsibility, I could not maintain the stance of an individual artist. So I gave the organizers my microphone and all my tapes to use for the five days.

What that meant was that to do interviews with Nicaraguan women, I had to go back to the ones that lived in the Managua area. I missed interviewing women from other areas in Nicaragua and regret this with the most profound grief. Some of these women have now been killed by the contras. I know that one woman I met, about age twenty two, fell while defending a small farm. The militia she was in held out for over 14 hours before being overtaken. This woman was raped by many men, mutilated, and then thrown into a pit and shot. I still want these women's testimonies as voices in LAS NICAS and will feel this loss whenever I see the tape.

In terms of my own preplanning, before I went to Nicaragua I wrote everybody I knew, describing the project. I asked people to give me old super8 film equipment, course outlines in teaching super8 filmmaking, money, or any questions they wanted me to ask about women in Nicaragua. Well, I just got a lot of questions.

I recommend that anyone who is going on a trip follow the same process because these questions gave me invaluable clues about how to approach interviews. I went down with four typed sheets of questions, and often when I was sitting in front of someone, I'd just leaf through the questions. Obviously I did not ask them all, but they had phrasing I might not have thought of, and some questions I used over and over. I'll tell you which those were:

One was, "Describe what you do all day from the moment you get up in the morning." Women almost always answered, "I get up at 5 or 5:30 am." In a hot culture, people do get up at 5:30 am because at 3 or 4 pm it can be brutally hot, so most people take advantage of the cooler morning hours. When women get up at 5:30 they make tortillas; they mop the floors and sweep the patio in the dry season when everything accumulates

dust; they may do some laundry; they may make several meals which will be heated up by other family members during the course of the day; they have to get transportation to go to work.

Another question which reveals what has happened to women and what their concerns are in a period of rapid change was to make comparisons with the past. Most successful was to ask a woman, "How does your daughter's life at 15 compare to yours when you were 15?" In general, South American intellectual life has not been affected by the kind of Freudian culture we have here, where pop psychology such as Ann Landers and Freudianism has meant that everyone sees childhood as significant and likes to talk about their childhood as part of social exchange. I learned this earlier in the late 60s, when I taught English as a second language in Lima, Peru. Then my adult students were charmed when I asked them to write or talk about their childhood. In other words, you can go into a group of Latin American intellectuals and ask, "What's your earliest memory?" and people will react as if nobody had ever asked them such an interesting question before. So, in Nicaragua, as a way of assessing revolutionary changes in people's consciousness, I would ask women to reflect on the differences between their daughters' lives now and their own lives when they were that age. The women were fascinated to articulate these contrasts.

To get at issues of sexual politics, I would ask, "Have men changed?" or "How much have men changed?" Most of the women I talked to were interested in men as partners and in sex, but not one said anything good about the institution of marriage. The women liked being mothers and liked having men in their lives, but marriage just meant work.

Finally, a friend who teaches Latin American studies helped me phrase the question I thought was most precarious. Many people in the U.S. want to know about gays in Nicaragua, especially in comparison to the situation of gays in Cuba. This friend suggested that I ask, "What role did homosexuals play in the revolution, or do they play in the revolution?" This avoids the confrontation implied in asking, "What do you think about homosexuals in Nicaragua?" or "What's the situation of homosexuals in Nicaragua?" and it also assumes that revolutionaries are also homosexuals.

"I don't know any homosexuals," all the women except two answered. In fact, this ignorance is probably due to the fact that there is a division between the sexes in Latin culture in which men go out at night and women stay at home with the family. That is a generally held social assumption, and one that is hard to counter when women want to go out at night to political work. It derives from the Spanish tradition, inherited from the Moslem world, of women living and carrying out family affairs around a courtyard, isolated from the outside world. Thus one woman I interviewed said that she knew about gay bars and openly gay culture because she had lived in Mexico and traveled to France, but that she did not think that this kind of gay culture existed in Managua (In contrast, U.S. male tourists to Nicaragua have told me there is a small gay male street culture at night in Managua). In fact, many Latin capitals have a more sophisticated urban life than Managua. Nicaragua is much more like a hick country, you might say. It has a more rural orientation and the Somozas had benefitted from maintaining an almost feudal social and economic structure, so Nicaragua never developed the kind of urban culture that Mexico or Argentina has.

Later, in September 1984, I showed the Spanish-language version of LAS NICAS to a group of women in the ministry of agrarian reform. After I had finished showing it, one woman said, "Well, that's really wonderful because it distills the vernacular flavor of how Nicaraguan women speak. (In fact, LAS NICAS is scripted and read by Chicago-based actresses, even the Spanish-speaking version.) "But," these agrarian reform sociologists said to me, "your work discusses many things that people do not talk about openly here." "Oh," I replied, "What could that be?" They chimed in, one

after the other, "Abortion." "Birth control." "Homosexuality." "Well," I said, "do you think those things should be talked about here?" "Oh, yes."

Most gratifying, one woman conducting sociological research to see why more women were not officers in the Farm Workers Union told me that this whole discussion made her realize that she had probably met lesbians in the rural areas that she was investigating. Now she wanted to go back to talk to these women again and see if they wanted to discuss these issues. In intellectual terms, as far as I know, no study has ever considered rural lesbians in South America. Even in the United States, analyses of gay culture usually presuppose urban culture. That presumption is world wide. For an employee in Nicaragua doing research for a government agency to want to find gay and lesbian culture within rural culture indicated to me the great curiosity many Sandinista women have about the reality that was never taught them and their determination to discover the truths within their country.

When I asked these women if they thought LAS NICAS would get on Nicaraguan television, they flatly said no -- because it took the risk of dealing openly with sexuality.

SHOWING OF LAS NICAS AND QUESTIONS THAT FOLLOWED.

Why did you repeat the images you did? I found that irritating.

One of my models was Bertolt Brecht. I wanted to point out the possible social and emotional contexts that give an image meaning. Brecht said that there should be some gesture to sum up the person's social stand. I found it interesting to take the same image and use it in different ways. For example, the secretary can represent secretarial work, or she can stand for the middle class in Nicaragua. People here might not have thought about such a condensation of socially-based connotations implied by an image of a Nicaraguan secretary.

I think another reason people get frustrated by repeated imagery in a slide show is that they think they have the right to see ever new imagery, and I wanted to frustrate this consumer mentality, i.e., consuming new things all the time. Usually the linearity of film and video narrative leads the viewer to expect surprises and new things in the story line and imagery, but from the nouveau roman on, modernist texts have interfered with that expectation, often for political reasons. I follow in that line. In LAS NICAS' prologue, I tell viewers that the images are metaphoric, expressive, and symbolic. Since the sound track was so heavily conceptional and demanded a lot of attention, I went for a cool image track, in which the images worked musically or almost purely connotatively.

I ended up locating that repetition of images in relation to the voice-over text. I knew that the five actresses were saying things that probably came from 100 women, but I started forming identification relations between the voices and image track and focussing on or creating characters.

That's fine. My co-author, Carole Isaacs, and I understood this to be part of a "feminist aesthetic" in women's filmmaking, that there is a political need throughout the world to give women the voice. Women have to be listened to as they tell their condition, this speaking has to be recognized as an intellectual act, and listening to women's specific voice has to become a general social function assumed by everyone. Furthermore, the voice of women talking to each other within the domestic sphere, what we paid attention to in Nicaragua, represents women's traditional subcultural mode of expression. Discussion constantly goes on in the domestic sphere, and reflects the specific point of view of those who do domestic labor, psychological labor and ego-tending included. In Nicaragua we found that this discussion had been transformed. Often it was overtly political, as when women got together in the Sandinista block committees, which are mostly women. Other times, the conversation revolved around

rationing, war, opportunism, or the political aspects of religion. As a woman, I will judge any revolution by what goes on in that sphere -- did the revolution get that far or not? So I see my political function as an artist to hang around the kitchen and see what is going on there.

In fact, aesthetically and politically Carole and I considered it very important to preserve the anecdotal flavor of kitchen table conversation, and I am delighted when viewers say they get hooked into the tape at that level. On the sound track we tried to use the kinds of words your grandmother or neighbor woman or aunt would use to tell you something over coffee. I know that this is not the ordinary level of political discourse, especially for the left. In fact, the right has been more effective at seeing this level of communication as "political." In terms of my own location in society, it is easy to work out of that level narratively and visually because I live in that environment. I have been unemployed for so long that now my artistic and intellectual and political relations are generally conducted in that sphere, and I am very comfortable speaking from that place, especially as a feminist.

In the Spanish version, do the women speak like?

No. Carole and I scripted the narration. When we did LAS NICAS as a slide show, we used a cassette tape with our own voices reading the script and with music mixed in with a Radio Shack mixer. On a technical level, we scripted because we did not go with good microphones and had mediocre recordings sound-wise. More important, we faced a huge task of cultural translation rather than just accurate grammatical translation. We in the U.S. are used to a certain narrative style, both in fiction and in reportage. In one sense, the lead sentence in journalism, the topic sentence in paragraphs, the punch line in a joke, or the climax in a story all indicate a need to "get to the point" which is not part of Latin narrational style. There is a shaggy-dog story-telling style in Latin culture that people enjoy. In contrast, in LAS NICAS you get a story in five or six sentences which may have taken twenty minutes to tell.

Furthermore, we probably reduced that story to a strong image, like the women who told about running away from the planes up into the mountains, where clouds of insects bit her, and then she didn't run any more but just protected her children from the planes by hiding them under the largest palm trees. We went for the image because that is part of our conversational style in which people give vivid details while they tell an anecdote with a punch line.

Furthermore, ordinary conversation in Latin America, particularly in revolutionary situations, is filled with a lot of what people here would call "rhetoric." Even ordinary people's conversation in Nicaragua often presupposes Marxist concepts, so that you often hear words like "imperialism." In Nicaragua this rhetoric especially means a lot to many women, because they are talking about concepts and principles that have transformed their lives in a short period of time. Because these concepts are, in fact, enacted as social principles, women have been lifted out of an oppressive domestic situation into social participation, and in many ways women are the makers of the revolution. What viewers here receive as "rhetoric" is not rhetoric to women who use these words all the time.

I am bicultural and bilingual, and I enjoy the kitchen styles of conversation of both U.S. and Nicaragua women. The Nicaraguan women trust me not to distort their story, and because of the bond of love between us, I have a lot at stake emotionally in conveying their views accurately. In the act of translation, in trying to make this something which would be like "ordinary" talk for U.S. audiences, I think I have done an honest job as I reduced the testimonies to their imagistic and anecdotal elements and cut political language drastically.

On the level of listening, I felt intimately connected, even voyeuristic, as if I were in the rooms where the women were speaking. But the images did not have the life-like look of most documentaries but a kind of touch-up paint look. Did that come from transferring the slides to video?

I am glad you noticed that. You are perceptive. First of all, I worked with a lot of formats, with rear screen projection of the slides and taping with a 3/4" camera, which let me move around the image; and then with a slide copying lens attached to my VHS camera, which let me zoom in and out and not pan but which gave better color because I could shoot directly into sunlight. The format I worked in at any given time was dictated by my degree of poverty and by what was available for low-budget video in the city I was living in at the time. More significant, when I first played back my 3/4 inch rushes of copied slides, I noticed that this looked like poster art. I love that visual style and went for it. Surely, if you want to work in video, you should never look back and regret the loss of Kodachrome fine grain but should love, or learn to love, blocks of color and close ups.

I felt like I was experiencing a battle, with the visuals leaving me out and the audio pulling me in.

Yes. I take it as an aesthetic principle in film and video production that you can have a hot sound track and a cool image track or vice versa, but that you can't have both "hot" at the same time. If you want people to get into your sound track, you can put something minimal -- or cool or warm or sweet, whatever you want to call it -- on the image track. For me, the common decision to go with sync sound, which Hollywood made a while back, means that the cinematic sound track is usually not that complex. But when you want drastically to increase the intellectual demands made by the sound track, you may move against people's craving for visual pleasure. In this aspect I follow the same path as many contemporary political filmmakers (as described by Peter Wollen in his essay on the two avant-gardes). That line of the avant-garde tries to wean you away from identification and narrative continuity and force you into rational thought, which in some ways is a forcing of the experience of unpleasure. Perhaps I made the image track expressive, even "sweet," to alleviate the unpleasure, because my motives for emphasizing the audio track were somewhat different. I think that this audio experience is very much part of life in the domestic sphere, where the audio track of emotional relations is constantly being generated and often the same script repeated. Furthermore, I am convinced that the audio track we play for ourselves in our minds derives from the socially experienced audio track of the domestic sphere, since as you all know that is where we formed it.

You said the Nicaraguan revolution goes on in the domestic sphere, but I felt an edge in the tape, as if there's a revolution that still needs to come. Not only do the women need to find a place in it, but I was not sure whether the women's revolution is being sanctioned by the Sandinistas and seen as the entire country's job, or whether it is an additional battle that the women are taking on for themselves.

Well, the Sandinista government has really attacked job discrimination and generally has a respectful attitude toward wanting women in positions in power. A country which relies on women to defend it even to the point of bearing a gun and killing the enemy and also needs women to raise its babies is one that respects women. In other words, in a state where only the men do the killing, that division sets apart an area of male responsibility and power. But if you need everyone to fight, people are more equal. And when women are encouraged to enter the work force, they become economically independent, some work is done at home by men, and women learn the strength of collective social interaction with peers in public life.

But beyond that, I see another kind of struggle. First, women work the double day, at work and childrearing. Second, there is a lot of war trauma, and so much has had to

go into the war effort and for so long, Nicargua has seen a regression back into traditional sex roles (ironically, this has also been true with the Israelis and the Palestinians for the same reasons). At home it becomes easier for both sexes to let up on battling sexism since everyone is worried about someone in the family getting killed, and most people want more babies to replace those killed and ease war trauma. And when war pushes people into desiring the stability of traditional family structures, when both war tension and age old sexist patterns increase in strength, people may not get stability emotionally but rather a lot more divorce.

But I think of revolution as a specific moment where a battle is won that represents a military victory for the revolution.

That's the male version of history, in which generals, mostly men, fight and win.

Battles only create the opportunity for revolutions to begin and then never end.

In NICARAGUA, when the revolution gets more refined, it gets closer and closer to the domestic sphere.

I cannot imagine a finished revolution. This generation's conquest of nature has left nature pretty bad off for the next. In order physically for humankind to live, the next generation may establish completely different social structures. I don't believe that either capitalism or communism has envisioned what these other social structures might be, and whatever solutions they choose, people will not reach utopia even though each generation acts out of utopian desires. That fascinates me.